

Headdresses of the Tlingit and Haida Indians

Three Tlingit dancing headdresses, one crest hat, and a shaman's crown are located in the Northwest Coast display case in the museum gallery.

Construction

Designed for dancing, the *Shakee.át* headdress features a carved frontlet and long train. It is constructed on a cylindrical frame of thin strips of wood or baleen covered with cloth. Steller sea lion whiskers, sometimes alternating with orange and black flicker tail feathers, surmount this frame. The focal point of the headdress is the carved wooden frontlet that rests above the dancer's forehead. The carving on the frontlet portrays a clan crest, representing an animal or a supernatural being from the clan's legendary past. Inlays of iridescent abalone shell embellish the frontlet and its border. The sides of the headpiece are covered with swan skin or ermine furs that frame the face of the dancer. A long



train of cloth or hide, covered with ermine skins, hangs down the dancer's back. The examples on exhibit represent a shark, a hawk face above a human face, and an eagle above a human.



The killer whale crest hat, another type of ceremonial headgear, is constructed of shredded cedar bark on a twig framework upon which rests a killer whale dorsal fin carved in hardwood. A train of human hair hangs from the point of the fin. This headdress on exhibit might be of Tlingit or Haida origin.



Shakee.át Frontlets

Shark I-A-0025

Hawk/Human I-A-0133

Eagle/Human I-A-0325

History and Tradition

The tradition of the *shakee.át* may have originated at the northern extremity of Tlingit territory around Yakutat and spread southward along the coast, though similar dancing headdresses are worn by other tribes to the south as far as Vancouver Island. Headgear bearing the image of the clan crest are among the clan's most treasured possessions and were only viewed during ceremonies. The crests were the property of lineages whose members traced their heritage to a

common ancestor who had claimed the right to use the symbol of an animal or supernatural creature. They believed that these headdresses evoked the history and the great deeds of the clan ancestors. The *shakee.át* and the killer whale hat, exhibited in the Northwest Coast regalia case, are examples of this type of ceremonial headgear.



Killer whale crest hat I-A-607

Headdress Use

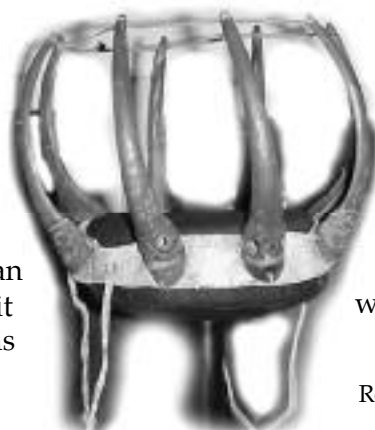
High-ranking members of the host clan wore their headdresses while performing welcome dances and during ceremonies and potlatches. During the ceremony, the *shakee.át* headdress are worn while performing songs, involving supernatural spirits. Before the ceremony, the crown, formed by sea lion whiskers, is filled with soft white eagle down. As the dancers crouched, hopped, and bobbed their heads, the down floated out of the headdresses, filling the air and coating the guests in a symbol of peace.



Haida dancers at Klinkwan, Alaska., c. 1900.
Alaska State Library Historical Collection PCA 87-316

Shamanic Headdresses

The headdress of carved mountain goat horns is the only headpiece with shamanic origins exhibited. The crown-like headdress is made of a leather headband with mountain goat horns carved to resemble claws. The faces carved in the bases of the horns represent the shaman's spirit helpers. This type of headdress was an essential component of a shaman's kit of special devices used to cure victims



Shamans Crown I-A-0791

of illness. The rattling noises of the points of the carved horns were believed to summon the shaman's otherworldly helpers, as were many other shamanic tools that were shaken or rattled. With the assistance of the spirit helpers, the shaman sought to draw the illness out of the patient by touching the afflicted part of the body with the crown.

Research by Laura Jacobsen, Museum Volunteer

References

- Emmons, George Thornton
1991 *The Tlingit Indians*. University of Washington Press, Seattle, WA.
- de Laguna, Frederica
1972 *Under Mount St. Elias: The History and Culture of the Yakutat Tlingit*. Smithsonian Institution Press, Washington, DC.
- Holm, Bill
1983 *The Box of Daylight: Northwest Coast Indian Art*. University of Washington Press, Seattle, WA.
- 1986 *Spirit and Ancestor: A Century of Northwest Coast Indian Art at the Burke Museum*. University of Washington Press, Seattle, WA.
- Kaplan, Susan A., and Kristin J. Barsness
1986 *Raven's Journey: The World of Alaska's Native People*. The University Museum, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, PA.
- Wardwell, Allen
1996 *Tangible Visions: Northwest Coast Indian Shamanism and its Art*. The Monacelli Press, New York, NY.
- Wyatt, Victoria
1989 *Images from the Inside Passage: An Alaskan Portrait by Winter & Pond*. University of Washington Press, Seattle, WA.